DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 396 256 CS 012 497

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TITLE Interrupting Gendered Discursive Practices in Classroom Talk about Texts: Easy To Think about, Difficult To Do. Reading Research Report No. 54.
INSTITUTION National Reading Research Center, Athens, GA.; National Reading Research Center, College Park, MD.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 96
CONTRACT 117A20007
NOTE 36p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Communication; Classroom Research; Communication Research; *Discussion (Teaching Technique); Higher Education; Junior High Schools; *Language Arts; Middle Schools; Sex Differences; Student Attitudes; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Behavior
IDENTIFIERS Communication Behavior; *Conversation; Feminist Scholarship; *Gender Issues; Teaching Perspectives; Text Factors

ABSTRACT

A study explored ways that three university-based and two middle-school-based teachers might begin to alter or interrupt discursive practices that have in the past permitted inequities in classroom talk about text to go unexamined and unchanged. A feminist theoretical frame guided the study's focus on gender as a lens for examining power differentials that govern how people think, act, and speak in the social positions they occupy in life and in classrooms whether they be as teachers, learners, males, females, English-as-a-Second-Language students, or members of different religious or ethnic groups. Field notes on text-based discussions and interviews with students were collected in a graduate-level course on content literacy, a seventh-grade language arts class, and an eighth-grade language arts class. Transcripts of weekly research meetings and narrative vignettes summarizing a series of observations and interviews resulted in multiple layers of data. Findings focus on self-deprecating talk, discriminatory talk, exclusionary talk, and teachers' desiring neutrality. Interpretations of these findings address the difficulties each teacher encountered in trying to alter his or her classroom practices. In a concluding section, authors offer what they view as being the most significant after working together to understand gender dynamics and power relations that influence what occurs (or does not occur) during text-based classroom discussions. Contains 51 references. (Author/RS)

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Interrupting Gendered Discursive Practices in Classroom Talk About Texts: Easy to Think About, Difficult to Do

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CS012497

NRRC
National Reading Research Center

READING RESEARCH REPORT NO. 54
Spring 1996

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The work reported herein is a National Reading Research Project of the University of Georgia and University of Maryland. It was supported under the Educational Research and Development Centers Program (PR/AWARD NO. 117A20007) as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. The findings and opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of the National Reading Research Center, the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, or the U.S. Department of Education.

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David Hinson has his Master's degree in English Education from the University of Georgia. He is a middle-school Language Arts teacher in a large rural school district in northeast Georgia. He is interested in learning how class discussions can enhance students' engagement with texts.

National Reading Research Center
Universities of Georgia and Maryland
Reading Research Report No. 54
Spring 1996

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Abstract. *The authors conducted a study to explore ways that university- and school-based teachers might begin to alter or interrupt discursive practices that have in the past permitted inequities in classroom talk about text to go unexamined and unchanged. A feminist theoretical frame guided the study's focus on gender as a lens for examining power differentials that govern how we think, act, and speak in the social positions we occupy in life and in classrooms whether they be as teachers, learners, males, females, English-as-a-second-language students, members of different religious or ethnic groups, and so on. Fieldnotes on text-based discussions and interviews with students were collected in a graduate-level course on content literacy, a seventh-grade language arts class, and an eighth-grade language arts class. Transcripts of weekly research meetings and narrative vignettes summarizing a series of observations and interviews resulted in multiple layers of data. The findings reported from analyzing these data focus on self-deprecating talk, discriminatory talk, exclusionary talk, and teachers' desiring neutrality. Interpretation of these findings addresses the difficulties each teacher encountered in trying to alter his or her classroom practices. In a concluding section, authors offer what they view as being most significant after working together to understand gender dynamics and power relations that influence what occurs (or does not occur) during text-based classroom discussions.*

A natural curiosity about the differences we make in students' lives is central to what we do as classroom teachers. Whether we teach in public or private universities, in

schools designed for youngsters from kindergarten through college, or in alternative settings, we feel a certain inquisitiveness about what our students take away from their experiences in our classrooms. Part of that curiosity has to do with content, but another part has to do with what students learn from the actions and interactions we sanction as we go about our daily routines. It was the latter that stirred our interest in conducting the present study, to explore ways that university- and school-based teachers might begin to alter, or at the very least "interrupt" (Brodkey, 1992, p. 310), discursive practices that have in the past permitted inequities in classroom talk about texts to go unexamined and unchanged (American Association of University Women, 1992; Sadker & Sadker, 1994).

Discursive practices emanate from what Gee (1990) refers to as Discourse with an uppercase *D* (or ways of being in the world that signify specific and recognizable social identities) to distinguish it from discourse with a lowercase *d* (meaning language used in specific genres). In short, discursive practices make up what Gee refers to as our "identity kits" (p. 142)—that is, the spoken and unspoken rules and conventions that govern how we learn to think, act, and speak in all the social positions we occupy in life, whether these be as teachers, learners, parents, children, researchers, club members, church members, members of different ethnic groups, and so on.

Exploring how teachers come to know and alter discursive practices that are counterproductive to students' engagement in classroom talk about texts has practical significance for educators at all grade levels. For example, in an earlier study (Alvermann, 1995), Donna wrote about her experiences as a university professor coming to terms with middle-school students' gendered ways of interacting in peer-led discussions. The discursive practices she identified in that study, while different from those found in the present one, suggest the importance of exploring students' gendered talk about texts at varying grade levels. Findings from other studies conducted by members of the Santa Barbara Classroom Discourse Group (e.g., Floriani, 1993; Lin, 1993) and Bloome (1987) also attest to the significance of studying how everyday life in middle-level classrooms is accomplished in and through social and discursive practices that engage students in talking about the texts they read and write.

While a growing body of literacy research has documented that classroom discussion is one avenue for fostering student reading and engagement in subject matter classes (Alvermann et al., in press; Dillon, 1989; Hinchman & Zalewski, in press; Moje, 1994), in elementary language arts instruction (Almasi, 1995; Commeyras & Sumner, 1995; Eeds & Wells, 1989), and in bilingual classrooms (Heras, 1994), what is less well documented is how such discussion sometimes perpetuates students' gendered ways of interacting (Davies, 1989a). When students discuss, there are tacit language conventions for holding the floor, interrupting others, introducing new topics, and the like. These conventions, bound up as they are in gendered discursive practices, become practically invisible to teachers and students over time (Cohen, 1994; Guzzetti, 1996). Their invisibility coupled with the

gendered language of texts—which if left unexamined allows stereotypes to be reconstituted in each reading (Penelope, 1988)—are central to understanding the difficulty in interrupting certain discursive practices in classroom talk about text.

In framing the questions that guided the present study, we drew from our understanding of the research on classroom discussion and our belief that classroom talk about texts provides a viable context in which to study how gender is socially constructed in routine and largely unexamined ways. We were particularly interested in exploring three questions: (1) What kinds of gendered discursive practices might one expect to find in text-based discussions? (2) What difficulties arise when teachers attempt to interrupt those practices? and (3) How might the insights gained from such a study be used to foster students' engagement in classroom talk about texts?

Theoretical Framework

We chose to ground our study in feminist perspectives because of our focus on interrupting gendered discursive practices that create or sustain power differentials (Lather, 1991; Neilsen, 1993). This focus lent itself to using gender as a lens for looking at issues that go beyond viewing data simply in terms of male/female differences. For example, as we simultaneously collected and analyzed our data, we found ourselves viewing gender as representative of relationships of power, particularly power differentials that surfaced initially in the classroom discussions of Donna's graduate-level content literacy class and later re-emerged as issues to be addressed by David and Sally in their middle-level language arts classrooms.

Because feminist perspectives adhere to the notion that the purpose of research is to change the world, not simply study it (Stanley, 1990), there is a commitment to blurring the distinction between research and social action in order to enact changes in existing hierarchies that serve to silence those lacking in power or authority over their own lives. According to Fine (1992), feminist researchers are committed to breaking the silence so that taken-for-granted power inequities and vested interests are exposed and transformed. From Fine's perspective, feminist research "is at once disruptive, transformative, and reflective; about understanding and about action; not about freezing the scene but always about change" (p. 227).

Central to feminist theorizing on methodology are concepts such as positionality (Alcoff, 1988) and perspectivity (Messer-Davidow, 1985). Positionality assumes a political identity that is sociohistorically located and one in which gender is viewed as "an emergent property of a historicized experience" (Alcoff, 1988, p. 431). Somewhat similarly, the concept of perspectivity also grounds one's ways of knowing and interpreting experience in personal history. However, Messer-Davidow's (1985) concerns rest more with epistemological and methodological issues. According to her, when perspectivity is used to frame a domain of inquiry, it requires us to include people with diverse perspectives and to insert ourselves into the inquiry process:

> When we are diverse knowers who insert ourselves and our perspectives into inquiry, then knowing becomes a collective endeavor grounded in our experiences; our experiences gain acceptance as evidence; and knowledge is transformed from an authoritative, freestanding construct to a common, conditional formulation. "Truth" no longer functions in the traditional senses of gauging the universality and predictability of knowledge, nor does "verisimilitude" demand accuracy in representing "reality." Instead, equity and awareness are the standards for a self-conscious, other-conscious, relational way of knowing. (p. 18)

Concepts such as positionality and perspectivity emphasize the impossibility of so-called "neutral" or disinterested viewpoints because researchers as well as those researched have diverse opinions that are shaped by social, cultural, and historical circumstances. Both of these concepts informed our methods of selecting participants for the present study and collecting and analyzing the data. For example, they affected our decision to select Sally and David from among several students in Donna's graduate level content literacy course who volunteered to become participants in the ongoing study. Sally taught eighth-grade language arts classes in a predominantly European-American middle-class suburban community located nearby the university; David taught seventh-grade language arts classes in a neighboring rural county, one in which the public school system served approximately equal numbers of European-American and African-American students from lower- to middle-class homes.

Elements of diversity that stemmed from our different personal histories affected our decision to combine close-up data collection and analysis (the role assumed by Donna and Josephine, a graduate research assistant) with a more distant and once-removed analysis by Michelle, a professor in the same department as Josephine and Donna. This joining of multiple roles and diverse perspectives is what we believe contributes to the study's uniqueness. For it is a study not about ardent feminists and their pedagogical explorations, but rather it is about three more or less emerging feminists (Donna, Michelle, and Josephine) and two middle-school teachers (David and Sally), who were willing to participate in a feminist project without necessarily viewing themselves as feminists.

Methodology

Data Collection and Analyses

The data sources included field notes, teacher's journal entries, students' two-page reflections, students' double-entry journals, researchers' written personal histories, students' autobiographical sketches, partial transcripts of videotaped classes, full transcripts of audiotaped student interviews and research team meetings, students' work and assigned reading selections, musings in private memos, student questionnaires, and course evaluations. The data were collected and simultaneously analyzed over a nine-month period of time from March 1994 through November 1994.

Our process was a layered one because each time data was analyzed, the texts generated became a new source of data which in turn was added to a corpus of data that grew as we moved through the study's three phases of investigation.

Phase I (Spring 1994). This phase of the study focused on Donna's content literacy course, which met for 5 hr one night a week. Twenty-seven graduate students, many of them practicing teachers, crowded around both the outside and inside of a horseshoe table arrangement. Of the 27 students (23 females and 4 males), 25 were European American, 1 was from China (a male), and another was from Taiwan (a female). Class typically included a mini-lecture by Donna on topics related to the assigned common readings; demonstrations of strategies for learning from text; several 10-min special-topic presentations by students; a student-led panel discussion on the topic of the week; and time for students to reflect and write in their double entry journals.

While Donna taught, Michelle took field notes on her laptop computer, and Josephine videotaped. Students were given the option of participating fully or remaining in class but not allowing themselves to be videotaped or their talk and work analyzed. All 27 agreed to participate and signed written consent forms after reading a full description of the study. Students' participation involved being interviewed and turning in weekly two-page reflections on the various ways they positioned themselves (or were positioned by others) in terms of gendered literacy practices, assessment, and other course-related topics. Each week, Donna read and responded in writing to their two-page reflections. Students' participation also involved writing about what they were learning in the course and how it related (or did not relate) to their own experiences. This information was recorded in their double-entry journals, which were turned in at the end of the course.

After each class, Donna wrote in her journal about the events she deemed noteworthy, and Josephine independently reviewed the videotape of the class for actions and interactions she thought were relevant to the study's guiding questions. Donna's journal, Josephine's video analyses, and Michelle's field notes were entered into Ethnograph (Seidel, 1988), a computer program used in qualitative research to store, organize, code, and retrieve data.

In preparation for the weekly research meetings that followed every class, Donna, Michelle, and Josephine read each other's Ethnograph printouts and made comments in the margins about various events, actions, and interactions that seemed relevant to the questions guiding data collection. They shared these comments at the meetings and raised questions about events they wanted to understand better through further data collection. At the weekly research meetings a new layer of data was created as they also took notes about reactions they had to each other's interpretations of the data, occasionally reviewed portions of videotapes to clarify certain points, and used the transcripts of student interviews, the two-page reflections, and the double entry journals to contextualize their analyses.

Phase II (Summer 1994). The research team increased by two members in the summer

when David and Sally, two students formerly enrolled in Donna's content literacy course, joined the project. The team met for 2 half-days and 4 full-days to identify the discursive practices that Donna had worked to interrupt in her class and to discuss strategies that David and Sally might use to interrupt similar practices in their own classrooms the following fall.

During data sharing sessions (all of which were taped and later transcribed), Sally and David viewed several video clips of text-based discussions in Donna's class and read portions of the accompanying commentaries that Donna, Michelle, and Josephine had written. Sally's and David's reactions became yet another layer of data in the team's on-going analyses. Each member of the team also read articles on topics such as using alternative forms of data representation (Richardson, 1993) and interpreting gendered views of teaching (Miller, 1992). Team discussions of these readings focused on their implications for collecting and analyzing data in David's and Sally's classes the following fall.

Phase III (Fall 1994). From late August through November, Donna and Josephine alternated weekly observations of text-based discussions in one section of Sally's eighth-grade and David's seventh-grade language arts classes. As they observed, they typed field notes on their laptop computers. They also conducted open-ended interviews (all of which were audiotaped and transcribed) with 4 or 5 students on an individual basis following each of three videotaped discussions in both David's and Sally's classes. The interview questions dealt with students' perceptions of how they participated in discussions, what they liked and disliked about discussions, and whether or not they felt the teacher treated everyone equally. Students who were not interviewed filled out questionnaires that dealt with the same topics as the individual interviews. In all but two cases, parents/guardians signed consent forms that permitted us to videotape their children. (In the two exceptions, permission was still granted for students to be interviewed and for their written work to be analyzed.) Copies of all student work, assigned reading selections, and notes taken during the debriefing sessions with David and Sally were collected by Donna and Josephine on a regular basis.

As in the first phase of the study, there were weekly research meetings involving Donna, Michelle, and Josephine. Prior to the meetings, Donna and Josephine shared copies of their field notes with each other and with Michelle. These were the same field notes they had shared with David and Sally following classroom observations. The research meetings began with discussions of the analytical comments that the three researchers had added in the margins of the field notes and ended with discussions about the relevance of feminist perspective-taking on the data that had been collected and analyzed thus far. When David and Sally did not attend these meetings, Donna and Josephine put forward the two middle-school teachers' concerns and comments that had surfaced during the post-observation debriefing sessions.

The process of creating layers of data made use of the team members' different roles and perspectives, and was supplemented from time to time by the narrative vignettes Donna and Josephine wrote to highlight events in

David's and Sally's classes that addressed the study's guiding questions. The vignettes included data that were summarized across a series of class observations and student interviews. Michelle, David, and Sally read and reacted in writing to the vignettes. Their reactions became yet another layer of data that figured into the final analyses and write-up.

Profiles of Participants

Feminist theorists contend that "it is inevitable that the researcher's own experiences and consciousness will be involved in the research process as much as they are in life" (Stanley & Wise, 1993, p. 58). One methodological challenge that concerns feminists is how to present these experiences without appearing egocentric or letting the experiences become intrusive in the research process (Lather, 1991). Our approach is to present a concise profile of each author participant that was created by blending together all five of our voices—overlapping and for the most part indistinguishable from one another.

Although Donna wrote the first layer of each of the five profiles, Michelle, Josephine, David, and Sally wove their own views into that initial layer, consciously choosing to interrupt the modernist practice that accentuates the individual by denoting *I* as separable and identifiable from *we* (Harre & Gillet, 1994). Readers of these profiles sometimes will have a sense of who is speaking (e.g., when boldface, small-caps type is used to represent the thoughts of the person being profiled); at other times it will be unclear. By deliberately confounding our voices, we lay the groundwork for the multilayered interpretations that we draw later on from the data.

In retrospect, we asked ourselves, "Could there have been any five people more unlike one another than the five of us who participated in this study?" Definitely, in terms of ethnicity (we are all of European extraction); maybe, in terms of social class; but not likely in terms of our views on gender and our willingness to consider gender as a pervasive influence in all human relations. Yet we grew in our understanding of each other's gendered views on literacy practices as we became more comfortable exploring the wellsprings of our own ideas about gender and its relationship to power.

David. He told us that there are two kinds of teachers. One is the "guide on the side," while the other is the "sage on the stage." He sees himself as the latter. As a student in Donna's content literacy course, he would have liked Donna to act more like a sage on the stage. He preferred hearing from Donna rather than his classmates. I DID NOT PAY TUITION TO LISTEN TO CLASSMATES GO ON AND ON.

David's vision of himself as a sage on the stage seems in tune with his former life as a disc jockey. For 9 years he was accustomed to playing the winners and shelving the losers. He wouldn't have kept his job any other way. Is it David the disc jockey or David the teacher we are observing? Both descriptions I believe, imply that David is an actor and performs daily for his students. HOW UNUSUAL IS THIS? I LIKE THE GIVE-AND-TAKE WITH AN AUDIENCE. FOR ME, IT'S MORE ENJOYABLE TO VIEW TEACHING AS "SHOW BUSINESS." And he's good! I think that is one reason why I

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never voiced any of my criticisms about his tendency to control students' discussions. Why should I criticize something that was working for David and his class? WHAT EXACTLY WAS THERE TO CRITICIZE? I feel I have not been honest with David.

I remember being shocked when I heard David say that he finds himself having to fight the tendency to call on the attractive, verbose students over the unattractive, passive students during class discussions. Later, I thought it was good that David was aware of his biases and wanted to alter them.

At first I could make no connection with David. However, as I considered all that was written about him and his class, I realized that we share a basic need—that of *control*. This need appears to manifest itself very differently in the two of us. David seems to more actively control conversations, and he is forthright in his opinions. I maintain control more passively, quietly, protectively. This control provides each of us a measure of safety that we need—but for what reasons?

Donna. WHO IS SHE? Donna's ability to appreciate multiple perspectives is a strength. She always wants to know how all of her students view an issue. But Donna sees her ability to honor multiple perspectives as being tied to her ambivalent nature—a part of her life that she finds troubling. A DIFFICULTY I'VE EXPERIENCED THROUGHOUT THE STUDY SEEMS TIED TO MY AMBIVALENCE ABOUT INTRODUCING ISSUES OF GENDER AND POWER INTO STUDENTS' DISCUSSIONS OF LITERACY. USUALLY THE TALKATIVE ONE, I HAVE AT TIMES REMAINED CURIOUSLY SILENT IN GENDERED DISCUSSIONS THAT BORDERED ON THE UNCOMFORTABLE.

I think Donna's ambivalence reflects her shifting sense of responsibility for individuals she perceives to be temporarily positioned as "underdogs." For example, when she raised feminist issues in class, she worried how it affected the 4 males. She was concerned that they felt alienated when others in the class spoke disparagingly about practices derived from male-dominated, Eurocentric cultures. At another point in time, convinced that the women in the class needed her support, Donna said, "I must encourage them to stop apologizing for their intelligence and to stop giving away their voices because they feel they talk too much."

I THINK MY CONCERN FOR THOSE I PERCEIVE AS UNDERDOGS CAN BE TRACED TO MY CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES. AS A YOUNGSTER GROWING UP IN A WORKING CLASS FAMILY THAT MOVED TO PROGRESSIVELY "BETTER" NEIGHBORHOODS, I GREW TO DISLIKE AND RESIST THE PRETENSES OF THE MIDDLE- AND UPPER-MIDDLE CLASS FAMILIES WHO SET THE NORMS IN THOSE SO-CALLED BETTER NEIGHBORHOODS.

Donna frequently brought up issues of class—first, when we wrote our personal histories, and later during our research meetings. I recall that she said her father organized the first labor union at the Westinghouse plant where he worked. He was not one to let the powerful run over him or his coworkers; nor is Donna. PERHAPS THOSE EARLY MEMORIES OF CLASS DIFFERENCES AND MY FATHER'S STRUGGLE WITH THOSE IN POWER OVER HIM MAY HELP EXPLAIN THE AMBIVALENCE I EXPERIENCED IN ATTEMPTING TO INTERRUPT

CERTAIN DISCURSIVE PRACTICES IN MY CONTENT LITERACY COURSE. FOR SURE, WHATEVER SENSE I FINALLY MAKE OF FEMINIST PEDAGOGY CANNOT BE DIVORCED FROM MY SENSITIVITY TO CLASS ISSUES AND RELATIONSHIPS OF POWER.

Michelle. Believing like Simone de Beauvoir (1952) that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (p. 281), Michelle helped us question the gendered literacy practices in David's, Donna's, and Sally's classrooms. She wondered about the feminine side of David (AND I WAS INTERESTED IN HOW HE CONSTRUCTED HIS IDENTITY AS MAN), the shifting stances toward power inherent in Donna's actions, and the struggles for self-esteem that are just beginning to become a part of Sally's public life.

I DID NOT SEE THIS PROJECT AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO CONVERT OTHERS TO MY WAY OF THINKING; RATHER, IT SEEMED TO BE A PLACE IN TIME WHERE FIVE PEOPLE COULD CONSIDER FEMINIST ISSUES WITH REGARD TO GENDER AND CLASSROOM TALK ABOUT TEXTS. I VIEWED MY ROLE AS *PROVOCATRICE* BECAUSE I ASSUMED THAT MY LIFE EXPERIENCES WERE DIFFERENT ENOUGH FROM THE OTHERS TO GIVE ME A UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE ON ISSUES OF GENDER. I HOPED TO BRING UP IDEAS FOR CONSIDERATION THAT WOULD OTHERWISE GO UNEXAMINED.

Michelle seems to be greatly influenced from her experiences as an adolescent when she discovered that learning to play the role of female was fraught with unknowns and possibilities. TO EXPLAIN THIS I QUOTE FROM A 1969 PSYCHOLOGICAL EVALUATION: "MICHELLE IS FUNCTIONING IN WHAT IS BROADLY CONCEIVED OF AS NORMAL LIMITS. SHE IS GOING THROUGH A RATHER DIFFICULT TIME IN HER LIFE WHERE THERE ARE A GOOD MANY ISSUES ON HER MIND. SOME OF THEM HAVE TO DO WITH GROWING UP AND PLAYING THE ROLE OF A FEMALE." IN RETROSPECT, THIS SEEMS AN APT CHARACTERIZATION OF BOTH THEN AND NOW. DURING ADOLESCENCE, I RESISTED THE SHIFT FROM PLAYING KICKBALL, BASEBALL, FLAG FOOTBALL, MARBLES, AND COPS AND ROBBERS WITH THE BOYS AND GIRLS IN MY NEIGHBORHOOD TO STANDING ON THE SIDELINES TRYING TO LOOK PRETTY WHILE ADMIRING THE BOYS' TALENTS AND PROWESS. MANY OF THE GENDER EXPECTATIONS REGARDING WHAT CONSTITUTES FEMININITY AND WHAT A WOMAN SHOULD DESIRE HAVE BEEN UNACCEPTABLE TO ME. THROUGHOUT MY LIFE, I HAVE BEEN FASCINATED BY THE WAYS IN WHICH PEOPLE CHALLENGE AND RESIST NORMATIVE GENDER PRESCRIPTIONS.

Challenging is a word that describes one of Michelle's roles in our research meetings. Michelle thinks differently than I do. Several times when I passively took a back seat, Michelle focused on me and elicited from me additional comments to make sure that I was understood correctly by other members of the group.

Sally. Sally's reluctance (and sometimes more like resistance) in exploring issues of gender with her eighth-grade language arts class may be rooted in parts of Sally's personal life that I expect the rest of us will never know. YES, I DO RESIST SOMEWHAT! I THINK I SEE GENDER ISSUES AS NO MORE IMPORTANT THAN OTHER ISSUES, SUCH AS PERSONALITY

TYPE, WORLD VIEW, DEVELOPMENTAL ISSUES—MAYBE I SEE GENDER ALONE AS TOO NARROW A FOCUS. ALSO, I THINK MY APPROACH TO TEACHING AND MY NEED TO CONTROL NEVER ALLOWS FOR ANY HONEST EXPLORATION.

Sally told us that as a child she learned to "make nice" and everyone would be happy. As of late, however, she is beginning to question how her "making nice" is tied to feelings of lowered self-esteem. I QUESTION THIS "LOWERED SELF-ESTEEM." IT DOES NOT FEEL GOOD, BUT AT SOME LEVEL I KNOW IT IS ACCURATE. TWO CONSTANT MESSAGES FROM MY CHILDHOOD SEEM IN CONFLICT: "YOU ARE COMPETENT AND CAN DO ANYTHING" AND "HOW OTHERS PERCEIVE YOU IS IMPORTANT AND THEREFORE A MEASURE OF WHO YOU ARE." I'M NOT SURE YET HOW ALL THIS PLAYS OUT, BUT IT MUST AFFECT MY NEED TO BE IN CONTROL. IF MY CLASSROOM IS NOT IN CONTROL BY SOMEONE ELSE'S STANDARD, THEN MAYBE I WILL BE JUDGED AS LESS COMPETENT AND MAYBE IT WILL BE TRUE. THIS MAY ALSO EXPLAIN THE OBSESSIVE, OVERKILL, PERFECTIONIST WAY I APPROACH SOME TASKS. I DON'T REALLY DOUBT I CAN DO A TASK, BUT I FEEL THE NEED TO DO EXTRA AS INSURANCE.

In terms of Sally's goals for discussions of literary texts in her classroom, the importance of accepting and affirming the ideas of others loomed large, both in how she perceived her role and that of her students. She thought of herself as a model for students' discussions. And, while she envisioned discussions in which "ideas I have never considered will be expressed," she was quick to control almost every aspect of small- and large-group discussions. Perhaps she feared that if she opened up discussions she would disturb her calm and peaceful existence at the middle school where she teaches.

Josephine. Josephine, whose laughter and opinions are strong and clear, can (when needed) adapt and get along with just about anybody. Her adaptability and natural friendliness enabled her to deal with the unique position she occupied within the research team. As a former literacy teacher in an alternative high school, she was only one year removed from the classroom. Thus, she was able to identify with the majority of the teachers who took Donna's content literacy class.

As both research assistant and graduate student, Josephine was located somewhere between the professors (Donna and Michelle) and the other graduate students enrolled in Donna's content literacy course. That location allowed her to hear talk by professors about students and by students about their professors. In short, Josephine was our vortex. As the team member most often charged with relaying messages to and from David and Sally, Josephine was privy to both insider and outsider perspectives. I LIKE BEING PICTURED AS A VORTEX. I HAVE ALWAYS LIKED TO BE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE ACTION.

Working and writing from her new found interest in Women's Studies and feminist literature, Josephine experienced discomfort in her lack of honesty in dealing with David. WHEN I REREAD MY FIELD NOTES, I WAS SURPRISED AT HOW DIFFERENTLY I INTERACTED WITH DAVID AND SALLY. TWO YEARS AGO WHEN MY FAMILY MOVED TO GEORGIA,

WE SETTLED IN A RURAL AREA POPULATED MOSTLY BY WORKING CLASS, POLITICALLY CONSERVATIVE FAMILIES. MY HUSBAND, KNOWING MY LIBERAL VIEWS, ASKED ME NOT TO MAKE TROUBLE IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD OR AT THE BALLPARK WHERE OUR BOYS PLAY BASEBALL. I DECIDED TO GO ALONG WITH HIM, FOR I SAW NO GOOD REASON NOT TO. AFTER ALL, I ONLY HAVE TO PLAY THIS ROLE OCCASIONALLY, AND LIKE SALLY, I PURPOSELY CHOSE THE MORE PEACEFUL ROUTE. I DO NOT FIND THIS AT ALL HARD TO DO, FOR I LEARNED AS A CHILD TO BE QUITE GOOD AT PLAYING THE FEMININE ROLE. I THINK I SUBCONSCIOUSLY DECIDED TO PLAY THAT ROLE WHEN I VISITED DAVID'S CLASSROOM AND LATER WROTE UP OBSERVATIONS ABOUT HIS CLASS DISCUSSIONS.

Interpretation of Findings

In our efforts to understand the nature of some of the gendered discursive practices that surround text-based discussions, we found ourselves repeatedly focusing on the idea that gender is primarily about relationships of power. This understanding led us to be particularly sensitive to discursive practices in which self-deprecating and discriminatory talk encouraged sex stereotyping and complaints of unequal treatment in Donna's class discussions. Stereotyping was a problem in David's class discussions as well, but there it seemed more related to adolescents' exclusionary talk than to self-deprecating and discriminatory talk. Finally, because we understood gender to be primarily about relationships of power, we were sensitive to discursive practices in which efforts toward neutrality all too often perpetuated the status quo. For Sally, David, and Donna, desiring neutrality worked against the feminist project as Fine (1992) has described it.

Self-Deprecating and Discriminatory Talk

Self-deprecating talk. The poem that follows was inspired by field notes taken in Donna's class and by Richardson's (1993) work on poetic representation. Michelle titled it "Sorry Talk" to communicate in a somewhat dramatic fashion how women's self-deprecating talk (see words enclosed in quotation marks) positioned them as powerless, and their contributions in reaction to what they had read as inconsequential.

Sorry Talk

Glenda says, "I'm sorry but I disagree."
She's sorry.
Faye promises that she "will shut-up."
She's sorry.
Sharon confesses she "wasn't going to make another comment."
She's sorry.
Joy admits she "didn't ask that question very well."
She's sorry.
Eileen announces that she's "not very good at this."
She's sorry.
Toni declares she "never spells anything right."
She's sorry.
Sally apologizes for her thinking, "It's not deep like Liu-Shih's."
She's sorry.

Starting with the second time Donna's class met, Michelle began noticing how female students tacitly acknowledged their diminished status by qualifying, or apologizing for, their contributions to classroom talk about the assigned readings. Over and again throughout the remaining eight weeks of class as Michelle recorded in her field notes what sounded to her like self-deprecating talk, she began to harbor an odd mixture of annoyance and identification. On the one hand, she was annoyed that in a class comprised largely of female full-time teachers, former teachers pursuing doctorates, and prospective teachers pursuing master's degrees there would be this apologetic refrain running through their talk. On the other hand, she found herself identifying with these women. In Michelle's words:

> I titled the data-inspired poem "Sorry Talk" because to be sorry is to grieve for a loss or a mistake. When I reread my field notes and the self-deprecating comments made by female graduate students, I grieved a little for them and myself because to be female in a patriarchal world is to experience a loss of voice and courage, as Rogers (1993) has noted.

The "sorry talk" phenomenon has been identified by other researchers as well. For example, Sadker and Sadker (1994) wrote that "self-doubt has become part of women's public voice, and most are unaware it has happened" (p. 171). According to Lakoff (1975), who identified common speech habits in women that indicate doubt, hesitancy, indecisiveness, and subordination, there are parallels between women's speech and their place in society. Brown and Gilligan (1992) found in their research on young girls' development that 12- and 13-year-olds "interrupt themselves constantly to say, 'I don't know'—sometimes because they genuinely do not know, but often before going on to reveal remarkable knowing" (p. 174).

These reports about female speech patterns and the "sorry talk" that Michelle observed can be viewed as documenting a few among the many characteristics women develop because of their subordinate status in the social order. Although we could not help but notice the "sorry talk" in our data, we also recognize that by writing about it we stand to perpetuate an essentialist view of women—something we would prefer to avoid doing. Essentialist thinking among White feminist academicians has been criticized for overlooking differences among women, thus promoting the myth that privileged White women's views of the world are representative of the condition of all women. Choosing to focus on the self-deprecating talk we heard among female discussants in Donna's class also puts us at risk of being seen as generalizing too broadly about the loss of voice that reportedly occurs in adolescent girls (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Rogers, 1993). New research on female adolescent development suggests that (a) African-American girls from middle-class backgrounds maintain their strong voice as they move through the teenage years, and (b) only girls with a strong feminine orientation report loss of voice (National Public Radio, 1995).

Discriminatory talk. Typically, discriminatory talk occurred when students in Donna's class addressed issues of equality. Liu-Shih, a

female graduate student from Taiwan, helped us to think more critically about such issues. One of two students in the class for whom English was a second language, Liu-Shih tended to speak for longer periods of time than her American classmates. Donna had asked that students limit their reports to 10 min so that whole-class discussions might ensue. When Liu-Shih did her report on language and thought, she addressed the question of whether or not one can have thoughts in one language, English for example, that would be impossible in another language, such as Chinese. Liu-Shih's presentation, which ran well beyond the 10-min time frame, was identified by David as an example of an inequity that discriminated against him and other students from the United States:

> I think there's another inequity . . . and I've seen this happen in other classes. We have two Asian students in class. Now, two weeks ago when I presented my oral report, at eight minutes the old two-minute [warning] sign went up. Ah, and I think that all of the American students got the same signal. Now, I didn't keep count of the ten minutes that went by as our friend from Taiwan . . . who is a super sweet person and very intelligent [talked]. However, I would estimate that she probably spoke for around half an hour. I think that there have to be time limits. It's not that she was struggling with the language. I think she's fairly fluent. (Interview, 6/8/94)

David's view of the situation was that Liu-Shih was the same as any other student in the class with regard to her ability to meet the 10-min time limit set by Donna. To his way of thinking, Donna's treatment of Liu-Shih discriminated against those for whom English is their first language.

In trying to understand what constitutes inequality, we turned to MacKinnon's (1993) analysis of sex inequality under law. She helped us see that inequality is two-sided. David's claims about Liu-Shih define the kind of inequality that occurs when someone is treated differently but is the same. Inequality can also be defined as treating someone the same when that individual is different. As MacKinnon has pointed out, establishing what constitutes sameness and difference is problematic and hinges on what is used as the standard or point of reference for making decisions about similarity and difference.

From Liu-Shih's point of view, she thought of herself as different, a sentiment she expressed to Donna and Michelle on at least two occasions. For example, Liu-Shih explained that if Donna were to hold her to the same time limits as her classmates, who spoke English as their first language, this would disadvantage her because of the challenges she had to overcome in formulating and articulating her thoughts in English (Interview, 9/30/94). In another interview, Liu-Shih confided that she felt her classmates perceived her as different: "For native speakers, the environment is equal for everyone. . . . But for classmates, I am . . . treated differently, or silly. I wonder if there is real equality in America, although they said everyone should be equal" (Interview, 7/94). Liu-Shih's perception that she was treated differently by her classmates

seems to be borne out in Donna's allowing her a considerably longer time to speak and in David's referring to her as "our friend from Taiwan . . . who is a super sweet person and very intelligent." Discriminatory language is by definition that which recognizes differences between people and things (Webster's New World Dictionary, 1994).

Exclusionary Talk

David used a variety of materials to engage his seventh-grade students in reading and talking about gender issues. Donna and Josephine observed discussions revolving around sex-biased language in novels, gender messages conveyed in comic books, *Scope* magazine's report on sexual harassment in schools, local newspaper reports of sex discrimination in high school sports, and Harper Lee's depiction of Atticus Finch's manliness in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Although David seemed comfortable in introducing these materials, the students in his class frequently resorted to talk that was aimed at silencing or excluding the contributions of one sex or the other.

Lively discussions typically followed readings that dealt with gender issues, and sometimes those discussions carried over from one week to the next. This was especially the case when a student-generated topic or question was picked up by David and became the focus of the next discussion. For example, the week after his students had discussed "Soccer Fantasy" (Howell, 1994), which was a play about a female protagonist who wanted to join a boys' soccer team, David reminded them that during the previous week's discussion Latoya had raised a hypothetical question concerning a male's eligibility for an all-girls' softball team. David told us later that he saw Latoya's question as a means of getting the class to think about "maleness." His decision to look for ways that did not exclude males' concerns when issues of gender were discussed was in response to an earlier meeting with Michelle (Interview, 10/5/94), in which she had shared her belief that gender issues are all too often equated solely with women's issues.

After class on the day the students discussed the implications of a boy's joining an all-girls' team, David explained to Josephine that he had intended to nudge the conversation toward a more general look at "society's views of men . . . [e.g.] how does a person have to act to be perceived as a male?" David's wanting to explore gender as action parallels Butler's (1990) thinking that gender is a performance and "ought not to be conceived as a noun or . . . a static cultural marker" (p. 112). David felt the class "didn't get to this issue because we went around and around on the sports equity thing" (Debriefing session, 10/12/94).

Some of the concerns raised by the students in that hour-long discussion were reminiscent of earlier discussions in which the girls (or the boys) pulled together as a group along sexist lines and then attempted to exclude the other group's ideas. Although a few girls (including Latoya) thought it was fair that boys be allowed to try out for an all-girls' softball team, most of them flatly rejected the idea. Cherie pointed out that an all-girls' team "talks about 'girl talk' so boys would ruin everything." Jim, sensing that he was being cast as

one of the villains in the discussion, began to say things that suggested Cherie's exclusionary talk was causing him to reconsider where he stood on certain issues. He stated that a couple of weeks ago, he would have supported a mixed-sex team; but now that most of the girls in his class did not want to let boys play on such a team, he felt confused. Wally added that he felt bad about the situation and that it just showed the "stupidity of women." Jillene retorted that women were not stupid, adding, "It's a proven fact women are smarter." The proverbial battle lines between the sexes were redrawn as each side tried to outshout and exclude the other. The intensity of the students' talk was captured by Josephine's observation that "it [was] all moving so fast and loud" (Field notes, 10/12/94).

In writing a narrative vignette to accompany the field notes on this highly charged discussion, Donna concentrated on Cherie's notion of "girl talk":

> Cherie said she thought the girls' softball team talked about "girl talk"—so boys would ruin everything. When Cherie again mentions that the girls talk about girl things, David asks, "What are girl things?" David says that since he is married, he knows what girls talk about. Josephine adds [as an observer comment in her field notes that day]: "David, I bet you don't know everything we talk about." (Narrative Vignette, 10/28/94)

In a written response to Donna's vignette, Michelle further explored "girl talk" vis-a-vis Brodkey's (1989) concept of discursive resistance:

> According to Brodkey, discursive resistance involves "re-presenting a stereotype as an agent in a discourse the least committed to the preservation of that stereotype—as Toni Morrison does when representing Afro-American women and men as the agents rather than the victims of events in her novels" (p. 127). Cherie used "girl talk" (a negative cultural stereotype) to her advantage. Her presentation of "girl talk" is different from the way it is commonly used by males to stereotype the kinds of conversations women have when men are not around. David's claim that he knows about "girl talk" provoked discursive resistance from Josephine. Her comment suggested that all is not knowable with regard to what women talk about when men are not present. To suggest that it is knowable perpetuates the stereotype that there are certain predictable topics that constitute "girl talk." (Response to Vignette #2, 10/28/94)

What became increasingly apparent and troubling to us as the year progressed was the exclusionary nature of students' discussions, especially when gender was the focus. Although David seemed to be steering students toward thinking about gender as a socially constructed phenomenon—as in the discussion of how masculinity is viewed differently for Bruce Springsteen, Prince, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Mr. Rogers—there was a tendency for students' talk to slip into stereotypical patterns of gendered heterosexist thinking (Butler, 1990). When this happened, as in the example involving "girl talk," students seemed bent on excluding each other's ideas rather than

questioning the source of those ideas and why they might hold currency among their peers.

Desiring Neutrality

Sally's class. To Sally, neutrality meant not having to go against community values. At the time of the study, the school board in the county where Sally lived and taught was embroiled in a bitter controversy over a move by some members of the community to have certain books banned from the school library. This controversy created considerable tension in the community, which was largely conservative in its outlook on life.

In a debriefing session that followed Josephine's second visit to Sally's eighth-grade classroom, Sally said she felt that the discussion she had led on John Steinbeck's *The Pearl* a week earlier was "real awkward and real contrived" (Debriefing session notes, 9/13/94). To focus that discussion, Sally had asked students to consider a series of quotations from the first chapter of *The Pearl*. One of those quotations presented students with an opportunity to explore how gendered ways of thinking and writing can find their way into classroom talk about texts:

> Kino had wondered often at the iron in his patient, fragile wife. She, who was obedient and respectful and cheerful and patient, she could arch her back in child pain with hardly a cry. She could stand fatigue and hunger almost better than Kino himself. In the canoe she was like a strong man (Steinbeck, 1989, p. 677).

Sally directed the class to consider why Steinbeck might have written the description of Kino's wife in this way. Paula, the first student to respond, said Juana (Kino's wife) had the physical characteristics of a man, but still gave Kino the honor and respect he deserved as a man. Sally then underlined the word *almost* and the phrase *like a strong man*. When a student remarked, "almost like a strong man" Sally asked, "Does that get anyone's back up? Does it irritate anyone?" Again, Paula offered her opinion that Juana gave Kino the respect he deserved. At this point, Josephine wrote in her field notes (9/6/94), "Do all the students believe that husbands deserve respect because they are men? This is troubling to me. Why doesn't anyone question this tradition?" Another student, Patty, said Juana may have had qualities like a man, but they were also women's qualities. Again, Josephine wrote in her field notes, "What are women's qualities according to Patty?"

A week later, after Sally had read Josephine's field notes, she told Josephine that she was having a problem with the study. Sally attributed this to the fact that gender was not "a burning issue" for her:

> This is not my agenda. This is Donna's agenda. And I was trying to make it my agenda, and it really isn't. I'm interested in it [gender], but it's not a burning issue with me . . . And my class doesn't seem to be all that concerned about it. (Debriefing session notes, 9/13/94)

Sally said she did not feel adequately prepared to facilitate discussions in which her eighth-graders were asked to deal with gender-related

issues. She also explained why it did not seem prudent to ask the kinds of questions Josephine had suggested in her field notes on her first observation:

> You said, "how about husbands respecting wives?" And that's a great question, but it sure didn't pop up in my mind at the time. . . . Where do I cross the line in discussing literature and discussing family values and marital relationships that in this community I better stay away from? (Debriefing session, 9/13/94, about 9/6/94 class discussion)

Despite her misgivings, 2 weeks later, Sally attempted to introduce gender once again—this time, in a discussion of who was considered the more dominant character in *The Pearl*, Kino or Juana. Most students concluded that it had to be Kino because he was the man, and he made all the decisions for his family. Paula explained it this way:

> God created us—the man is the head of the family so that's obviously the way he thought it would work best. But the woman shouldn't be a slave, but the man should have the final decisions in all aspects. (Interview, 9/27/94)

Seeking neutrality in situations such as this one seemed the safest route to take, as Sally indicated in a post-lesson conversation with Donna:

> I want to be sure to stay away from any . . . discussion of family values that might be a problem in the community. Like, whether or not the male should be the head of the household. I'm not sure I want to tackle that one even though I have very strong feelings about it. (Debriefing session, 9/27/94)

At their next research meeting (10/19/94), Michelle, Josephine, and Donna discussed Sally's decision to distance herself from the project's focus on gender. Although they respected Sally's reasons for not wanting to challenge the community's dominant cultural values and beliefs, they wondered among themselves what her decision said about their own preparedness to take on a feminist project that was turning out to be far more complex than they had envisioned. Michelle, Josephine, and Donna knew one thing, however. They would continue to support Sally as she shifted her attention from interrupting gendered discursive practices to exploring ways of moving from teacher-directed to student-centered discussions.

David's class. David aspired to be a neutral discussion leader. To him this meant avoiding ideological stances that might endorse partisan politics or religious agendas; it did not necessarily mean refraining from talk about family values:

> I don't think a teacher should overtly endorse a political ideology or religion. Personally, I think respect for family transcends any political or religious ideology—falls into the category of values education. I don't see how anyone can take issue with that, except satanic cults. (Debriefing session, 8/31/94)

David believed that in striving for neutrality in class discussions, he would be interrupting his

customary practice of freely injecting his own opinions, a practice that often led to teacher-dominated discussions. Taking a neutral stance, he believed, would also help him remain true to the study's purpose:

> We're looking for biases and how, uh, my biases can influence discussions about texts. . . . And I just think . . . that what we're interested in here is what the children have to say. . . . I think that what they say will be truer and more authentic if I keep my views out of it and just concentrate on getting them [the students' views]. (Research meeting, 10/5/94)

In their early observations and feedback to David, both Donna (Debriefing session, 9/14/94) and Josephine (Interview, 10/5/94) commented on what they perceived to be David's success in maintaining a neutral stance during some fairly heated discussions. Later, they realized that their desire to support David had led them to endorse something that they did not believe in—a neutral teacher. The possibility of David maintaining a neutral or disinterested stance did not fit well within their understanding of feminist theorizing on positionality. Josephine and Donna began to wonder, "Was David bringing to the discussions on the various reading materials that dealt with gender an interactive style that was more in keeping with his sage-on-a-stage vision of himself than with his newly desired role as a neutral discussion leader?" It seemed so, for how else to account for Michelle's perception that David shared many of his own views on manliness without worrying that he might offend his students (Field notes, 11/2/94), or the students' perceptions that David frequently interjected his opinions during their discussions and responded with "right" or "I agree" to their opinions (Interview, 9/28/94)? Yet, the students we interviewed said that they liked to hear David's ideas and that hearing those ideas did not stop them from expressing their own. For example, Jamaica summarized the situation this way:

> Mr. Hinson's class is the class where . . . the teacher actually listens to everything that we have to say, and, um, disagree and agree. . . . I think Mr. Hinson's class stands out from the rest because we get to discuss, and, um, express our opinions freely. (Interview, 9/28/94)

Because David willingly and enthusiastically brought gender into his text-based classroom discussions, Josephine and Donna were sensitive to the need to monitor students' perceptions of this practice and to share those perceptions with David. Their initial worries about his seventh-graders' abilities to handle some rather explosive issues that grew out of their readings on gender did not appear to be something that disturbed the students. Perhaps this was partially due to David's willingness to share his stage with students so they could have more time to express their views.

Donna's class. Donna struggled with the notion of teacher neutrality. On the one hand, she knew it to be a practice incompatible with feminist thinking. On the other hand, she valued it because it enabled her to avoid expressing personal feelings that might be interpreted as partial or marginalizing. Above all, Donna wanted to avoid creating situations in

which students were made to feel like underdogs. She was particularly worried that her efforts to involve students in discussions of feminist writings (all of which she believed had implications for content teaching) would create opportunities for silencing individuals in her class who might be unsympathetic to feminist views.

Josephine and Michelle found Donna's struggle to be an interesting arena for exploring the concept of teacher neutrality within feminist pedagogy. Proponents of teacher neutrality as a discursive practice within the larger school-teaching Discourse value it for its role in helping students think independently and critically about the ethical issues of living in a multicultural society (Furlong & Carroll, 1990; Singh, 1989). However, feminist pedagogues, such as Lather (1991) and Gore (1993), view attempts at achieving teacher neutrality as playing into dangerous hands. They see neutral stances as being, first of all, impossible, and secondly, as undesirable, given their tendency to maintain the status quo. According to Lather (1991), feminist pedagogy with its emphasis on incorporating the personal experiences of teachers and students in the construction of knowledge "denies the teacher as neutral transmitter, the student as passive, and knowledge as immutable material to impart" (p. 15). For Lather, then, there can be no such thing as teacher neutrality within a feminist classroom. Nor does the concept of neutrality fit with Gore's (1993) call for feminist teachers to critique existing power structures through "new readings of old texts" (p. 79). For how could this critique be accomplished if teachers remain neutral?

That question arose for Donna each week as she prepared for discussions of outside readings that included feminist articles dealing with some aspect of content teaching and learning. Struggling as she was with the notion of teacher neutrality and her role as emerging feminist teacher, Donna looked for signs of frustration among the students in her course. And, not surprisingly, she found some. David, for one, evidenced such signs in an interview held midway through the course. In a transcript of that interview, he stated:

> Sometimes I find that when I try to bring what I describe as a dose of reality to the uh, discussion, that people become uncomfortable with that. . . . I think sometimes the implication is, well, you're the problem, Dave. . . . I just think that I am almost put into a situation sometimes where people want me to feel apologetic for the fact that I am White . . . [and] a male.

On the whole, however, it appears in retrospect that Donna need not have worried that the required feminist readings would lead to heated discussions. Typically, the students accepted what they read or heard discussed about gendered ways of being in the world as "normal" and just the way things are. For example, few comments were heard during a discussion of Treichler's (1986) study which showed that while students generally like discussion activities facilitated by their female instructors, they nonetheless judge those instructors as less competent in subject matter knowledge than their male instructors who lecture (Field notes, 4/27/94).

Only when the required readings mixed issues of race and class with gender did students' talk grow passionate. For example, one evening during a panel discussion on content-teachers' expectations for student achievement, nearly every student in the class had something to say to two of the panelists whom they thought had interpreted the outside reading from a racist perspective (Field notes and videotape, 5/18/94). After that heated and emotional discussion, a few of the students informed Donna in person or through their two-page reflections that they found such talk unrelated to their purpose for enrolling in the course. Although Donna did not change the readings she had selected for subsequent panel discussions, she did note in her journal that students were noticeably more reserved in their comments. A level of discomfort had been reached that was unacceptable to the majority of the class. In fact, several students alluded to this discomfort level in their final (and anonymous) evaluations of the class. For example, one person (Student #22) wrote: "We could speak freely in class, but I noted intolerance by the students to diverse viewpoints. I felt more comfortable when the instructor diffused such volatility." Apparently for some students, at least, Donna was viewed as the mediator in class discussions that turned volatile—a role she could hardly have assumed had she turned her back on teacher neutrality as a discursive practice.

Difficulty in Interrupting Gendered Discursive Practices

As with many things we do in our teaching lives, we found it was easier to *think* about changes we would like to make in our classroom practices than it was to actually *make* them. Some of the difficulties we experienced were predictable, given our personal and professional histories, not to mention our predilections; others were less so. The difficulties we address here are of the "less so" kind. These are the more interesting, we believe, for they are directly attributable to the decisions we made (or failed to make) as we moved through the various phases of the study.

In phase one, the novelty of trying on some new roles as emerging feminist teachers and researchers captured Donna's, Michelle's, and Josephine's imaginations; yet at the same time, it presented some challenging questions about data collection and analysis. Attention to those questions and to the concerns that they had about their new roles caused them to look less often and less critically at how (or if) Donna was making progress in her attempts to interrupt certain discursive practices that they had all identified as problematic. For example, the quarter was half over before Donna and Michelle took steps to change the direction of some of the female students' self-deprecating talk. Michelle invited one of the individuals who figured prominently in the "Sorry Talk" poem to have lunch with her. During lunch, they discussed experiences in academia that worked against their self-esteem and Michelle proposed that these were gender-related issues. They wondered if their own self-deprecating talk could be turned into speech that authorizes other women "to speak that about which [they] have been invited to be

silent" (Lewis, 1993, p. 68). Later, Donna met with the same individual to encourage her to share with her classmates the good ideas she had for restructuring the class's weekly activities schedule. The efforts made to interrupt some of the gendered discursive practices came too late in the quarter and involved too few students.

In phase two when Donna, Michelle, and Josephine attempted to teach David and Sally how to identify the gendered discursive practices operating in Donna's class that Josephine had captured on videotape, they realized just how difficult a concept *discursive practice* is. In looking for ways to make the notion of a discursive practice as "concrete" as possible, they managed to simplify it beyond recognition. This resulted in their having to reread and rethink what Gee (1990) and others (e.g., Davies, 1989b; Gore, 1993) meant by the concept. Even so, there were days when they would stop themselves midway through a sentence to say, "Now, what is a discursive practice?" In the end, all five of the authors found it was one thing to know, in an abstract way, that discursive practices are the spoken and unspoken rules and conventions which govern how one learns to think, act, and speak in different social situations; it was quite another thing to recognize them as they operated in their everyday lives. The routine nature of discursive practices makes them all but invisible—and thus difficult to interrupt.

In phase three, there were difficult decisions to make concerning how much authority Donna, Michelle, and Josephine should exert over the direction the study was taking. For example, when Sally confided that she was experiencing discomfort in attempting to point out to her eighth-graders how the language of *The Pearl* can reinforce stereotyped thinking about one's worth as a man or woman, the decision was made to back off from the study's original focus on gendered language. In acknowledging Sally's right to avoid issues that brought conflict into her life and possibly her students' lives, Donna and Josephine finished their observations in her room without further reference to gendered practices.

In David's classroom, the situation was different but no less difficult for Donna and Josephine, especially in terms of knowing when to make suggestions and when to remain silent. Although David seemed open to their comments and enjoyed reading their field notes, they hesitated to intervene during discussions when students' language excluded others on the basis of their being male or female. For example, when Jamaica bragged, "I think the girls, we're like, we dominate, we rule the class," and Ronnie complained "since we've been talking about sexism, the girls got their own point of view and the boys got their own . . . [and] we're always against each other" (Interviews, 9/28/94), Donna and Josephine avoided calling to David's attention their concern that his attempt to interrupt certain gendered discursive practices appeared to be inscribing those practices even further. In reflecting on why they found it difficult to express their concern to David in a direct manner, both Donna and Josephine discovered some things about themselves that made them question how well they had functioned in their newfound roles as feminist teacher and researcher.

Parting Insights

The insights gained from this study have implications for David and Sally as they plan for future classes and ways of fostering students' engagement in classroom talk about texts. They also have implications for Michelle, Josephine, and Donna as feminists who teach and do research. Our insights, written as first-person accounts, combine the personal with understandings gained from the study. Each author presents what seems of utmost significance after working together to understand gender dynamics and power relationships that influence what occurs or does not occur during text-based classroom discussions.

Donna

When we privilege the authority of our experiences such that "who we are becomes what we know' (Fuss, 1989), we run the risk of reifying those experiences. I continually struggled against any such reification. For example, I tried to remain open to the connections between who I am (as represented in my participant profile) and what I have come to understand about the *array* of subject positions that were available to me as I worked to interrupt certain discursive practices within my content literacy course. The ability to tolerate ambivalence in myself and others positioned me as a teacher eager to understand the multiple subjectivities circulating in my own classroom and in David's and Sally's classrooms. At the same time, I found this ambivalence troubling and the source of most of the doubts I had about myself as an emerging feminist teacher. One of those doubts had to do with the contradictions I experienced each time I attempted to step outside a self-imposed "neutral stance" to interrupt a particular gendered practice that I had identified in my content literacy course.

How to deal with my positioning in the class and the role of teacher authority led to still other contradictory feelings. What I had overlooked initially in analyzing the data (and only later realized through additional reading during the write-up phase of the study) was that in my bid to avoid identifying with a particular position in various class discussions, I had indeed positioned myself—and in a powerful way that made full use of my authority as teacher (Martin & Mohanty, 1986). And, therein lay the irony, for as Norman Fairclough (1989) would argue, my attempts to stake out an impartial or neutral position in class discussions could be interpreted as using what he refers to as *hidden power*, which is the act of disguising and downplaying one's authority in order to keep it. The realization that I may have relied on my hidden power to encourage students to speak their minds, while I remained "neutral," has given me further pause in considering what it means to teach from feminist perspectives.

Sally

Learning about discursive practices helped me view my classroom interactions in a new light. It encouraged me to look for ways to increase student engagement in discussion. I experimented with many configurations for conducting discussions. My students taught me

that, at least in the early part of the year, small groups work best if students can choose the group they wish to join. During one class period, a small group was responsible for structuring the class discussion, including the assignment of groups. These student leaders assigned kids to groups on the basis of friendships. In these groups of friends, there was lively discussion even from the silent types.

A related insight from this project is very personal. I am often the silent type in my graduate classes even though I have many ideas and responses to what is being said by others. I rarely speak up because I believe my contribution must be of great value, unique, even profound or I am wasting other people's time. In that case, I would be "sorry." I know this is a pattern that began in middle school and wonder how many of my students will still not feel comfortable speaking in front of a large group when they are at my stage in life. Until I participated in this project, I did not see this as a power and gender issue, but as a personality issue. However, maybe the two cannot be separated.

Josephine

As I reflect on the data and on my participation in the project, I wonder about the premium we place as teachers and researchers on comfort. Donna, Michelle, and I implicitly supported Sally's decision to evade dealing with gender issues when she voiced discomfort with the project's agenda. And I did not share with David some of our misgivings about how gender was being discussed in his classroom because of my desire to continue a comfortable working relationship with him. Donna worried about the comfort level of the four male students and of those in her class who were not sympathetic to feminist views. For fear of silencing some, Donna was uncomfortable speaking her opinions in class. The graduate students in Donna's class also spoke of their discomfort during discussions in which students argued from different positions.

Why are we so concerned with comfort as feminist teachers and researchers? Is comfort a necessary condition for learning? I once thought so, but now I am unsure. What would we have learned if we had been more honest with David and Sally about our reactions? And, what would have happened had Donna voiced her feminist opinions loud and strong in a way that might have threatened her students' comfort? I can only imagine the kinds of learning and thinking that would have transpired had we interrupted our own discursive practice of establishing and maintaining comfort. I am left with more questions than answers about myself as a feminist, a teacher, and a researcher. I am indeed uncomfortable.

David

Donna, Michelle, and Josephine made a conscious decision to conduct their research outside the boundaries of commonly accepted research designs. On the one hand, their rejection of tradition is refreshing and liberating. However, I think their methodology is vulnerable to validity threats. One year later, I am wondering about statements I made and statements provided by my students. Which ones actually represent "truth"? Which ones are

tainted because of how we were sensitized to feminist issues? Regardless of my concerns, I submit that my colleagues have diligently succeeded in being as fair and accurate as possible in interpreting the data.

To me, the great achievement of this research is that two public school teachers were *listened to*! Donna, Michelle, and Josephine listened carefully, even meticulously, to Sally and me. They listened enthusiastically, asked thoughtful questions, and never inhibited us from speaking candidly and often at marathon length. Hierarchical restraints, real and imagined, were discarded. We worked together as friends and equals. There was none of that "me expert, you lowly teacher" baloney that has historically silenced teachers. Teachers everywhere are being ignored and belittled, intimidated and silenced. Thus, for university researchers to listen, to care—it has been a precious opportunity and a tremendous fellowship.

Michelle

Through my participation in this study I have realized that there is an inherent flaw with the idea that you can study and alter (or interrupt) gendered discursive practices that perpetuate inequalities in classroom talk about text across three classroom settings in a 9-month research project. Being interested in understanding, challenging, and eventually changing the gendered discursive practices that sustain systems of authority that oppress throughout the world, in different cultures, in schools, in classrooms, and between and within individuals requires much more than could be accomplished through a single empirical research study. What I and my co-authors have learned about the influence of gender, discursive practices, and gendered discursive practices on the language of texts and classrooms has therefore been understandably modest. For those who feel a deep commitment to disrupting the concept of neutrality in teaching and want to alter classroom discourse that is self-deprecating, discriminatory, or exclusionary there is a life-time of analysis and action to be undertaken. And this cannot be accomplished simply through our modernist conceptions of empirical research wherein data yield findings that have prescriptive implications.

The difficulties we have acknowledged in our efforts to interrupt gendered discursive practices in classroom talk about text are ones that could only be addressed in a longitudinal research endeavor. It would require participants who feel passionately about recognizing and changing ways of thinking and acting that perpetuate a status quo founded on the privileging of some at the expense of others. It would mean risking harsh criticism from students, parents, administrators, colleagues and members of the community-at-large, which eventually could threaten one's teaching position. Those who profess to want to interrupt gendered, racist, classist, or heterosexist discursive practices should realize that this is likely to be a dangerous and revolutionary project if pursued more deeply than we have done.

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